

Sermon: Reflection on Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Year A, Proper 15

[Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:\(10-20\), 21-28](#)

Offered August 20, 2017 to Brookline Community Church & the Mason Congregational Church, Mason, NH

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This service was the Summer Revival Under the Trees held at the Mason Congregational Church.

Reflection on Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Here we are on a summer morning, in a sweet smelling church yard, two churches coming together for an old fashion revival under the trees. There's a might good potluck coming up next, great music, and really not that much preaching to have to sit through, right Veronica? And thank God for that. Because I have had enough of this week. I have had enough of Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists and murder and 90 year old veterans of World War II saying they fought Nazis once, they'll do it again and 70 year old veterans of the Civil Rights movement saying they've taken on the KKK before and they'll do it again. I've had enough of pundits thinking they're saying something clever when they point out that there isn't really a moral equivalence between Neo-Nazis and people opposed to Neo-Nazis. My heart is sickened that this is happening today in the country I love. I just want to sing in the summer sunshine and eat pie.

But we don't get to do that, you and I. Because whatever else we are, we're Christians. Jesus was so clear with us: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. More than that, we're Christians in rural country churches. In rural America, most towns are down to one church, the community church. We don't get to avoid the people we disagree with by going to a different church. We come on Sunday, and we sing and pray, and preach, and have coffee, and serve community meals, and anonymously help people out in our community. We do it together, side by side with people who voted for someone else for president, or who felt really differently about the pipeline, or about guns, or abortion or financing public education. We don't get to seal ourselves off from opinions we don't like because there's only one church. And we need to keep the Sabbath.

The person who wrote down today's reading from the book of Isaiah knew what it was like to have had enough. The Israelites had been conquered, their country devastated by war, occupied by a foreign power which was overrun by another foreign power. The rich and powerful and skilled people had been sent into exile a couple of generations before. It was just a huge chaotic mess. And then into that chaos, those who had been in exile were returning home.

And what did they find? People living in their houses. People who hadn't been rich enough or skilled enough to merit being sent into exile. Non-Jews and foreigners who had so little that moving into the aftermath of a war zone was a step up.¹ Maybe those returning from exile had been away for a while. But they knew their place. They knew the old ways. And it was time to lay down a little order here and get the riff-raff back in their rightful place.

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, "Proper 15, Pastoral Perspective, Isaiah 56:1, 6-8" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 338 & 340.

God steps into this moment through the Prophet Isaiah. No laying down a little order, no going back to how it used to be, no riff-raff.

Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant--these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. (Isaiah 56:1,6-8)

Oh. I guess that means we have to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. Love is the opposite of hate, and justice is love in action. So maintain justice. Do what is right.

For those who had been sent into exile, keeping Sabbath was the only part of the law of Moses they could readily obey.² To those left behind in Israel, with all the priests and the religious hierarchy dead or in exile, Sabbath was the only part of the law of Moses they could readily obey. Keeping the Sabbath anchored them back to who they were called by God to be, as a people.

Who are we called to be by God, as a people? I don't know. But not this divided. Not this incapable of listening to each other. But I want to point out to all the people gathered in a summer meadow, with pasta salads and devilled eggs waiting a few steps away, you need to share the Sabbath you keep. You know what it is like to ask someone you disagree with how his kids are doing and care deeply about the answer. You know what it is like to scrape plates next to a woman whose ideas about public schooling couldn't be further from your own. Those of us who keep the Sabbath in country churches have a skill, a talent, a practice, a faith ... that this country is losing. Share what it is like to set up a coffee house to benefit the homeless. Because honestly it's a blast. Share what it is like to offer a community meal, especially to seniors. You get to time travel without out all the tough physical training NASA puts you through.

When someone at work or in the grocery line talks about the country falling apart, mention that you've found it hard to hate someone while sharing a homemade lasagna and ask them how they are strengthening their community. If they don't have a great answer, suggest that you know a group that meets regularly on Sunday morning to do just that. And as a bonus you get to love God at the same time, so you fulfill both commandments at the same time. God is longing to *gather others besides those already gathered*. That is what love in action looks like. It looks like singing together on a Sunday morning with people you don't necessarily agree with. It looks like strong communities where people disagree with each other and still care what the other person thinks. Where everyone has a role and everyone's role is respected. It looks like justice.

² James Muilenburg, "The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 44-66: Exegesis," vol. 5 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 655.